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SUBJECT: SAI SUSPENDS ACTIVITY WITH ANBAR'S PROVINCIAL COUNCIL; CALLS FOR CHAIRMAN'S OUSTER

REF: A. BAGHDAD 3758
1B. BAGHDAD 3648

Classified By: Anbar PRT Team Leader Jim Soriano
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is an Anbar PRT reporting cable.

Summary

12. (C) Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha, leader of the "Iraq Awakening Movement," (SAI) called for the replacement of Anbar Provincial Council Chairman Abdulsalam Abdullah and the "suspension" of SAI membership on the Council. Ahmad's call came in a November 16 letter addressed to Abdulsalam while both were in Amman to attend a USAID-sponsored conference on drafting an economic development strategy for the province. Ahmad also called on the SAI reps at that conference to boycott the proceedings (there were fewer than eight SAI supporters among the estimated 115 conference-goers). The SAI has a long history of seeking to wrest political power from the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), which controls Anbar's Provincial Council (PC). Ahmad maintains that his personal ties with senior Embassy and MNF-I figures, as well as with PM Maliki, give him sufficient influence to replace any Anbar official of his choosing. Despite Ahmad's call for replacing Abdulsalam, the latter says he has no intention of resigning and can weather an SAI power challenge. Ahmad, on the other hand, has two options: find ways to keep up the pressure on the PC, or seek a rapprochement with Abdulsalam. Ahmad is in Dubai with no fixed date for his return to Iraq. End Summary.

The PDS Conference

13. (U) USAID contractor RTI sponsored a four-day off-site November 14-18 at the Marriott Hotel in Amman for a large group of Anbar notables to continue work on drafting a Provincial Development Strategy (PDS), a GOI requirement which is a long-term vision statement for future economic and social development. The conference was attended by at least 115 Anbaris, including political leaders, civil servants, and tribal sheikhs.

14. (U) The event was timed for the return of eight Anbari political leaders who had been in the U.S. October 27-November 11 on an International Visitors program. These included Provincial Council (PC) Chairman Abdulsalam Abdullah; Governor Ma'amoun Sami Rasheed; former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Rafe Al-Essawi; Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha, the leader of the "Awakening Movement of Iraq" (SAI); Ramadi Mayor Latif Ayada, an SAI member; and three Provincial Council members.

15. (C) The IV delegation contained a mixture of Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) representatives, who control the provincial government, led by Abdulsalam; two SAI reps, and two independents. There has long been tension between the SAI and the IIP over the control of the provincial government

(Refs A and B), but differences were contained in recent months due in part to the IIP's outreach to Anbar's tribes and bid to shore up Sunni unity in the aftermath of the August 1 Tawafiq walkout of the Cabinet. Moreover, the IV program that began in late October also provided an incentive for maintaining at least an outward appearance of unity. Nonetheless, tensions boiled over again at the PDS conference in Amman.

The Opening Session

¶16. (SBU) While in the U.S., Sheikh Ahmad turned aside overtures from PC Chairman Abdulsalam to participate in the conference, countering that he must travel to Dubai, where he maintains a residence for this family. Ahmad had not seen his family since August.

¶17. (C) Although Abdulsalam had signaled to us that he wanted Ahmad to deliver remarks at the November 14 opening session, Ahmad's participation remained in doubt. He was visited at his Amman apartment that morning by Dr. Rafe, who later told us that he urged the sheikh to make opening remarks. According to Rafe's account of that conversation, Ahmad was in a foul mood. He complained that he had not been consulted on the conference and that the slot of lead speaker at the opening plenary should have been reserved for him, and not Abdulsalam.

¶18. (C) During the conversation, it became clear that Ahmad was not merely displeased by the speaker's line up. He put front and center the SAI's long-standing drive to wrest political power from the IIP. According to Rafe, Ahmad boasted that his personal relationships with senior Embassy and MNF-I officials, and with Prime Minister Maliki, gives

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him sufficient influence to replace any Anbari official.

¶19. (C) Exasperated, Rafe reportedly told Ahmad that he could not have it both ways - calling for national unity, as he had done while in the U.S. with Abdulsalam and the other IV delegates, while acting divisively in Anbar. Rafe says that he advised the sheikh that the PDS conference would go on without him and that his staying away would diminish his stature.

¶10. (C) Ahmad was not persuaded by Rafe's entreaties. He departed Amman for Dubai on November 15, the second day of the conference, but not before approving a letter of that date addressed to Abdulsalam in which he not only criticized the PDS conference, but more importantly called for Abdulsalam's ouster as PC Chairman, and the "suspension" of the SAI members from the PC.

Text of Letter

¶11. (C) An RTI translation of that letter follows:

Iraq Awakening Congress
Special Bureau

In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful

To: Chairman of Al-Anbar Provincial Council
Greetings:

We have noticed the following points when our Awakening Congress (sic) members assumed their responsibilities as members of Al-Anbar Provincial Council:

Council members and Directors General of provincial departments have been traveling abroad and holding conferences outside Iraq without getting legitimate permission from central government.

The Council staged (the PDS conference) so as not to obey by

laws issued by central government.

Decisions (on organizing the conference) were a privilege for the Chairman and some members only.

The work lacks transparency (sic).

The role of Provincial Council members who represent the "Iraq Awakening Congress" was marginalized. They were not included in the committees and other important work of council.

The Provincial Council ignored and showed no interest with proposals and demands of the members from the "Awakening," and did not discuss it or take it into consideration.

Despite the lengthy discussions with the related officials over these points, we didn't find the will and seriousness to reach a successful settlement. It is our dedication to keep the (Provincial) Council working, and to maintain the stability of the security of the province. We have decided the following:

Suspend membership of our members in the PC and boycott the currently held conference in Amman until the following demands are fulfilled:

Replace the Provincial Council Chairman.

Activate the role of our members.

Re-organize all Provincial Council committees in order to ensure the effective participation of Iraq Awakening Congress.

For your perusal,

Signed by Abdul-Kareem Yousef on behalf of Sheikh Ahmad Abu Reesha, Chairman of Iraq Awakening Congress

Cc: Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies
Prime Minister's office
Governor Ma'amoun
Commander of the Coalition Forces, Anbar Province
RTI
PRT (Representative of the American Embassy)

End text.

The Conference Boycott

¶12. (C) The letter had not been drafted by the November 14 opening plenary. At that time, when it became evident that

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Ahmad would not attend, Abdulsalam turned to Sheikh Hameed Turki Shouka, who, like many of the tribal leaders at the conference, is not affiliated with the SAI, to be the "tribal speaker." When Hameed began his remarks, Ramadi Mayor Latif Ayada, an SAI partisan, left the meeting room. He displayed his pique to other conference-goers for the alleged slight shown to Ahmad. Latif did not participate in any further conference event.

¶13. (C) Other SAI members followed suit. There are an estimated eight SAI members on the Provincial Council and all were invited to the conference. We estimate that six or seven of them attended the conference. Some boycotters briefly wandered back into the meetings, but generally they sat in the hotel lobby, chatting with other conference-goers while avoiding direct participation. Ahmad instructed them not to accept RTI payment for lodging and meals.

The SAI Position

¶14. (C) As many conference-goers departed Amman at the conference's end on November 18, we telephoned Sheikh Ahmad

in Dubai for his comments on the foregoing. In a short conversation, he made the following points: he ordered the SAI boycott when he realized that Abdulsalam would be the first speaker at the opening session; he did not accept the third speaker's spot (after Abdulsalam and the governor), maintaining that he is an "international personality" and that a lesser speaking role would diminish him in front of his supporters; he is "more important" than PM Maliki because he is the chairman of the Awakening Movement; he approved the contents of the letter before his departure; the IIP is "working against" the people of Anbar, Abdulsalam lacks legitimacy, and several Anbari contractors who are IIP members are financing insurgent groups; and he intends to approach GOI officials to halt budgetary support for the province as a means to keep the pressure on the IIP. When reminded that the PDS conference is not about politics, but about economic planning, Ahmad said, in effect, that regardless of who sponsors a forum, he must be the first speaker and that he would introduce the PC Chairman, who would come after him. In tone and substance, Ahmad's presentation generally tracks with the account related to U.S. earlier by Dr. Rafe.

¶15. (C) During the conference, one SAI supporter, Sheikh Shalaan Nouri, sought out a PRT observer to discuss the boycott. He advanced two criticisms against Abdulsalam: he had not consulted the SAI, and that the "people of Anbar" view the conference wholly as the work of the IIP, and by inference, out of step with public opinion, which, according to Shalaan, is anti-IIP. Another SAI official, Abdul-Kareem Yousef, who drafted the letter and signed it for Ahmad, sought out the same observer to emphasize that the SAI is still part of the Provincial Council, and that its membership is merely "suspended." He repeated the SAI complaint of not being consulted, and argued that SAI members should have been named as the leaders of the five break-out groups. The observer took their points, but replied that the SAI's presence was genuinely sought, the conference was open, and that the SAI should have participated regardless of its concerns.

Abdulsalam's Reaction

¶16. (C) Meanwhile, Abdulsalam has told us that he has no intention of resigning. He ventured that he is in a strong position politically, has the support of many tribes not aligned with the SAI, and can weather the latest SAI power challenge.

¶17. (C) To prove his point, he hastily called PC members together at the Marriott lobby at 11 pm on November 17 to ask for a vote of confidence. No PRT staff was present, but according to Abdulsalam's account, 31 of the PC's 49 members were present, and 29 registered their support for him. Two members abstained. Two other PC members, both tribal sheikhs who were not staying at the hotel, were contacted by phone and also signaled their support for Abdulsalam. Accordingly, several SAI members observed the meeting at a distance in the hotel lobby. Other PC members invited them to join the discussion, but they stayed away.

¶18. (C) Nonetheless, in the past Abdulsalam has told us that he's been generally favorable to a power-sharing agreement with the SAI, but that finding qualified SAI members to serve on the PC has been a stumbling bloc. "They are uneducated," Abdulsalam says, referring to the tribal leaders aligned with the SAI. "I asked Ahmad to participate in the PDS conference. I asked him to send qualified people. They don't seem to be able to do that." Paradoxically, Abdulsalam identifies Abdul-Kareem Yousef, the SAI hard-liner who

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drafted the letter, as "an educated man" he could work with.

¶19. (C) Abdulsalam admits that the November 15 letter stings. Both he and Rafe say that during the IV program in the U.S.,

they sought to elevate Ahmad by giving him a place of honor in the seating arrangements. Now they express their disappointment that Ahmad shows little reciprocal sentiment.

¶20. (C) When asked to speculate on Ahmad's motives, Abdulsalam ventures that he has taken an anti-IIP stance to complement his anti-insurgent credentials. According to Abdulsalam, this would presumably put him in good stead with the Shia-dominated GOI. Abdulsalam says that his future relationship with Ahmad depends on whether the sheikh realizes that he acted recklessly and seeks a rapprochement.

Comment

¶21. (C) We should brace for more SAI-IIP fireworks in the weeks to come. The SAI has a pattern of challenge and retreat in its jousting with the IIP, going back to November 2006, when the SAI founder, the late Sattar Abu Risha, pressured the PC to increase its membership to make room for at least eight of his supporters. Dr. Rafe, again in the mediator's role, brokered that deal. That period of tension was followed by an uneasy truce and the expectation that the two sides could work together. But last spring, Sattar turned up the heat again, badgering the PC to allocate half of its seats to the SAI. That maneuver came to nothing, and was followed by several months of uneasy calm. Now under new management, the SAI is mounting yet another power challenge.

¶22. (C) Ahmad's actions may be the result of the heat from some SAI core members who want a vigorous opposition to the IIP. His petulance may be his way of buying back credibility from SAI partisans who don't want him to go soft on the IIP. As Dr. Rafe indicated to us in a side-bar, Abdulsalam's position as PC Chairman is likely more secure than Ahmad's as head of the SAI. By taking a hard-line against Abdulsalam, with whom he had called for unity days earlier while traveling in the U.S. on the IV program, Ahmad may be responding to a tribal drumbeat of opposition to his leadership of the SAI.

¶23. (C) Abdulsalam says he will weather the storm, and we take him at his word. Ahmad, on the other hand, seems to have two general options open to him: defuse the tension and probe for an opening on another day, or stay on the offensive. If the latter, Ahmad will find making a direct approach to the GOI hard to resist. Both he and his late brother have a track record of circumventing provincial authority to make direct appeals to high-ranking GOI officials on policy issues. Ahmad could do this again, and indeed, indicated to us on our phone call that he could find ways to create bureaucratic hindrances to discredit the provincial government. Angling for a GOI-appointed investigative committee to look into allegations of corruption would be one way to keep the heat on.

¶24. (C) Second, he will work the tribes. With only eight or so firm votes on the PC, the mathematical chances of a no-confidence vote against the PC chairman may seem slim, but the removal of the chairman (or the governor) does not depend on arithmetic alone. In a society where decision-making is by consensus, there would be a seemingly endless series of talks in the tribal diwans to find a compromise solution. If the challenger can bring shame on the defender, and convince others that his departure is in the interest of the tribes, a letter of resignation may result.

¶25. (C) Third, Ahmad may seek to use his new-found and self-proclaimed personal relationships with senior Embassy and MNF-I officials to pry concessions from the provincial government.

¶26. (C) Although the IIP can be ever as partisan and obstructionist as the next party, one would have to conclude after observing the PDS conference that its leaders show themselves intellectually and emotionally capable of putting aside partisan differences in favor of an open discussion of the province's economic future. The SAI, by contrast, has been partisan to the core. The common denominator in our

several discussions with SAI members is that any attempt to define the public interest that does not emerge from the SAI itself is counterfeit and suspect.

¶127. (C) Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha is in Dubai right now with no fixed date of return to Iraq. Upon his return, however, those senior U.S. officials with whom Ahmad claims to have close personal ties need not meet with him. Indeed, the U.S. should guard against inadvertently empowering him to the point where he believes he has the license to play the

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spoiler in a province that shows promise of stabilizing. But others in the chain of command would do well to seek out Sheikh Ahmad on his return for a frank discussion on a range of issues. End Comment.

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